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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FAULT LINES WITHIN AK ZHOL- LEADERS MANEUVER FOR POSITION

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During the February 12-13 weekend, Ak Zhol co-chairman Alikhan Baimenov held a special, closed party meeting with 62 regional Ak Zhol leaders to discuss the direction of the party. In addition to initiating a successful no-confidence vote against fellow co-chairman Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly, Baimenov challenged Ak Zhol's participation in the Coordinating Council of Democratic Forces of Kazakhstan (CCDF), which also includes the two other opposition parties: the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK) and the embattled Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK). This very public sparring over Ak Zhol's direction may be the first round of opposition positioning for the 2006 Presidential election. END SUMMARY

Background

¶2. (SBU) In March 2002, three prominent DCK members left to join the splinter party Ak Zhol: Bulat Abilov, a former Otan M.P. who defected to DCK; Alikhan Baimenov, who previously served in high executive offices including as Minister of Labor and Social Protection (2000-01) and Chief of the Presidential Administration (1998-99); and Oraz Zhandosov, who served as Chairman of the National Bank (1996-98), Deputy Prime Minister (1998-99 and 2000-01) and Minister of Finance (1999), among other positions, prior to joining Ak Zhol. While DCK has attempted a populist approach to its opposition, the membership of Ak Zhol has come predominantly from the ethnic Kazakh elites. A fourth prominent Kazakh politician, Altynbek Sarsenbaiuly, joined Ak Zhol in November 2003; he had previously served as Secretary of the Security Council (2001), Ambassador to Russia (2002-03) and as chief of various incarnations of the Ministry of Culture and Information (1995-2001).

¶3. (SBU) Prior to last year's Mazhilis elections, the four leading figures in the party agreed to a five co-chairman leadership structure, setting the question of ultimate leadership aside until after the election. A fifth co-chair, Lyudmila Zhulanova, is the only female and only non-ethnic Kazakh in this shared-leadership arrangement. She has kept a generally low profile, and appears not to have any strong personal leadership ambitions of her own. She is not known to have a strong personal constituency within Ak Zhol. In her speech at the Ak Zhol party congress last fall, she spoke exclusively about social welfare issues; she appeared to be comfortable, but uncharismatic, as a public speaker.

¶4. (SBU) Among the four male co-chairs, Baimenov and Sarsenbaiuly are generally considered the most politically savvy. Both men balance strong public personae with an understanding of policy and political machinations. Abilov, a wealthy businessman, has emerged as an energetic public speaker, who leans more towards flamboyant gestures than nuanced realpolitik. Zhandosov is Ak Zhol's policy wonk, who has pushed Ak Zhol heavily towards market driven economics; he is a shy, though impressively able, public speaker. The five co-chairman structure deferred the question of Ak Zhol's ultimate leadership until after the September elections, but few political observers believed that four such heavy hitters would be content with this arrangement for long.

THE PLENUM: CCDF AND NO CONFIDENCE VOTE ON SARSENBAIULY

¶5. (SBU) On February 13, Baimenov called a special, closed party plenum with 62 regional Ak Zhol leaders. While co-chair Zhulanova participated in the meeting and aligned herself with Baimenov, co-chairs Abilov, Zhandosov, and Sarsenbaiuly refused to participate. The plenum considered two questions: the integration of Ak Zhol into the CCDF and the role of Sarsenbaiuly in the party leadership.

¶6. (SBU) While Baimenov supported Ak Zhol's participation in CCDF, he criticized the CCDF implementation as co-opting or undermining the Ak Zhol apparatus. The CCDF, formed following the September elections, recently decided to open branch offices throughout Kazakhstan. Baimenov felt that this move signaled a planned transition of Ak Zhol support to a new opposition party that would arise out of CCDF.

Baimenov argued that the new offices would force regional Ak Zhol leaders to either compete or be subsumed. Baimenov stated that certain Ak Zhol leaders had placed "their own career interest higher than the party interests," and

requested a vote of "no confidence" in Sarsenbaiuly. The regional leaders agreed with Baimenov, voting 60-2 against Sarsenbaiuly's leadership.

17. (SBU) On February 14, Abilov, Zhandosov and Sarsenbaiuly held a press conference denouncing Baimenov's meeting. The three reaffirmed their commitment to working together through the CCDF to unite the opposition before the presidential elections. They conceded that the regional level leadership, who had the most invested in the party apparatus itself, supported Baimenov. Nevertheless, they indicated that at the most recent party congress, approximately 90 percent of the membership at large voted to participate in the CCDF and to nominate a single opposition candidate for president.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Although all five Ak Zhol co-chairmen have stated publicly that the party is not splitting, political observers have long suspected that the five-member leadership structure of the party would not accommodate the long term personal ambitions of the co-chairmen. While an internal split has emerged over the question of Ak Zhol's involvement with the Coordination Council of Democratic Forces of Kazakhstan (CCDFK), the larger question remains: who will emerge as the leading opposition candidate to challenge Nazarbayev in the 2005/ 2006 Presidential election. END COMMENT

19. (U) DUSHANBE MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

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